

# KOEPPEL ON WINE



**August 21, 2005**

Most people don't have wine cellars or wine rooms or wine closets or cabinets. Most people don't buy wine to age, as if they were 19th Century English barons, socking away case upon case of long-lived wines from Bordeaux and Burgundy in stone chambers deep under their country houses for the sake of their children and grandchildren, or, nowadays, for the auction houses.

In fact, only about five percent of the wine made in the world - though it receives 95 percent of the publicity - is intending for laying down. The rest, that vast other ocean of the world's wine, is meant for drinking within the first one to two years.

Still, those glamorous wines exist, and they can be glorious. And they can be disappointing, but as long as they're part of the realm of wine, I'm going to write about them for the people who have the time, the space and the fiduciary joie de vivre. In truth, we tend to drink wines that can age too soon, preferring, to our contemporary tastes, the vigor and rigor of youth to the mellowness of autumnal maturity.

---

## **Nickel & Nickel Cabernet Sauvignons: 2002**

Gil Nickel -- Oklahoma native, guided missile analyst and nurseryman -- founded Far Niente in 1979 on the site of a winery established in 1885 by John Benson; that winery, situated at the western edge of Napa's Oakville district, closed and was abandoned in 1919 with the onset of Prohibition. Nickel and his partners Dirk Hampson and Larry Maguire, restored the old building and property, with the first wines being released in 1982. Far Niente produces only cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay wines.

In 1992, the partners launched Dolce, dedicated to making a single dessert wine, and in '97 founded Nickel & Nickel, with the aim of producing single-variety, single-vineyard wines.

The first N & N wines were released in 2000. Winemaker is Darice Spinelli, who had worked for Franciscan as winemaker and then production winemaker. N & N now produces 18 wines: three chardonnays, three merlots and three syrahs, one zinfandel and eight cabernets. With the exceptions of one chardonnay, one syrah and the zinfandel, all grapes come from single vineyards in Napa Valley districts; vineyard names are featured prominently on the labels.

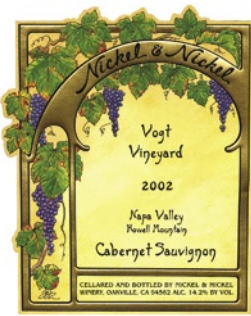
Unlike many important cabernet producers in the Napa Valley, who typically age their wines 22 to 24 months, often in new oak or with a high percentage, Nickel & Nickel ages the wines under review today from 17 to 18 months. The proportion of new oak is 40 to 45 percent, except for the Stelling Vineyard Cabernet, which sees 60 percent new oak. The result is oaken structure that cradles, nestles and nurtures, offering permeating strength and power (and a spicy, slightly vanilla-tinged influence in some cases) without dominating the wines.

Nevertheless, these are spectacularly deep, earthy, mineral wines through which the vineyards whence they originate speak eloquently of their soil and strata. Tannins, dense, velvety, chewy, tend to ramp up in mid-palate and never let go, so the finishes on the wines partake of all the briary, brambly, underbrush qualities for which serious cabernet sauvignon wines are known.

At the same time, these wines are so constructed that most of them are drinkable now, with grilled steak, lamb, venison and such, or can be aged, properly stored, for eight to 10 years.

These Nickel & Nickel cabernets will be released in September, giving you a few weeks to save up some dough.

Gil Nickel died in the fall of 2003. The new partner in Far Niente, Dolce and Nickel & Nickel is his nephew, Erik Nickel.

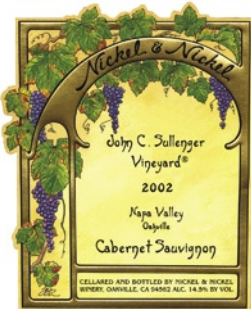


## Nickel & Nickel Vogt Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2002

Cabernet sauvignon  
Howell Mountain, Napa Valley, California  
Excellent

Vogt is a 14-acre vineyard at the top of Howell Mountain, northeast of the town of St. Helena. As is typical of mountain-grown grapes – Dunn Vineyards and La Jota produce well-known wines from Howell – tannins are both deeply etched and expansive. N & N's Vogt Cabernet '02 is vibrant and resonant, very earthy and minerally; it provides a richly flavorful yet briary and brambly mouthful of wine, and because it's so dense and chewy, because it seems to harbor immense reserves of power, I'm here to tell you that it's a BIG mouthful of wine. But, in its way, thoroughly enjoyable.

---

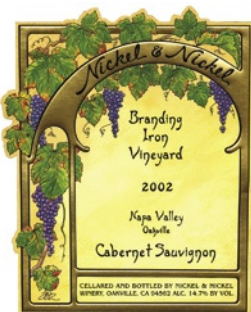


## Nickel & Nickel John C. Sullenger Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2002

Cabernet sauvignon  
Oakville, Napa Valley, California  
Excellent

Pure Napa Valley, pure Oakville. Smoke, lavender and violets, cassis, black cherry and black plum, spicy and polished oak, a mineral quality that practically glitters throughout the deep ruby-purple color: This cabernet seduces with loveliness and impresses with power, just the way things happen in the real world. Grainy, chewy tannins define the structure of this wine that actually grows more robust, more sinewy in the glass, yet it remains approachable, even as you feel the downward pull of its assertions and the fairly stern and austere tannins expand.

---

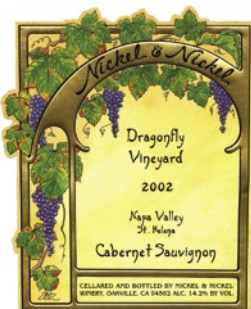


## Nickel & Nickel Branding Iron Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2002

Cabernet sauvignon  
Oakville, Napa Valley, California  
Very good+

Branding Iron – or at least “iron” – seems a proper term for this backward, earthy, tightly furled cabernet. This wine sees more skin contact than its cousins do – 29 days as opposed to 19 days for the Sullenger, 18 for Stelling, 14 for Dragonfly and 13 for Vogt – and it's chiefly in the skin where tannin resides. (It also receives a smidgeon more oak.) Ergo, this is one mother of a tannic wine, yet to be a tad more gentle about the issue, the tannins are supple, polished, finely-milled. And in a sense, their permeation, along with spicy oak, is so complete that there's no difference between them and the plum and black cherry fruit the wine embodies and its plush, velvety texture; the medium *is* the message. Still, briars and brambles come up on the finish, and the wine concludes with a tide of astringency.

---

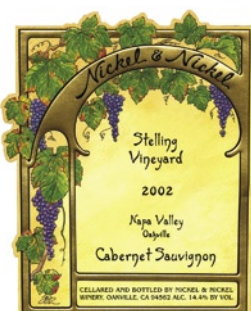


## Nickel & Nickel Dragonfly Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2002

Cabernet sauvignon  
St. Helena, Napa Valley, California  
Exceptional

Entrancing for its power and elegance, for its wealth of detail and dimension. Though the wine is tremendously earthy, there's red and black fruit galore here, sifted with more elements of dried Provençal herbs and garrigue (that dusty weediness peculiar to parts of the south of France) than we expect in a Napa Valley cabernet. This wine, resonant with scintillating mineral qualities, feels bottomless; its gravity could suck stars out of space. O.K., O.K., O.K., it's only wine we're talking about here, but the intensity and concentration, the profound depth and final austerity coupled with the winsomeness in crushed raspberries, lavender and licorice, are extraordinary. The Dragonfly Cabernet '02 knocks me out because it registers so handily the character of its vineyard and region but also because it does so in a thoroughly individual manner. That's what great wines do.

---



## Nickel & Nickel Stelling Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2002

Cabernet sauvignon  
Oakville, Napa Valley, California  
Excellent

Fine, porous tannins are packed into this cabernet, yet rather than erect a barrier, they seem like layers of veils. The bouquet is ripe, fleshy, meaty, minerally, bursting with mocha, cloves, potpourri and intense, concentrated black currant and black cherry. Flavors of those black fruits expand in the mouth, bolstered by polished, spicy oak, fathomless depths of minerals and burgeoning underbrush elements. All of that structure, though, cannot conceal a persistent note of lavender. The Stelling Vineyard lies at the base of the western hills of Oakville; it's the primary source for the cabernet sauvignon of Nickel & Nickel's sister winery, Far Niente.